

The Covenants, Grace, And Law (Part 22)

Colossians (C)

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We are going to begin the sermon this week in Proverbs 30:4-6. This may seem like a strange place to begin a sermon on the New Covenant, but the principle written here applies in a very vivid way.

Proverbs 30:4-5 Who has ascended up into heaven, or descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has bound the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name, and what is His Son's name, if you can tell? Every word of God is pure.

Now remember, you have to see verse 5 in context with the questions in verse 4 because the questioner is saying in effect, "Is there anything better than the Word of God? Is there any man who has ascended to heaven? Who is this person? To whom can I turn to get instruction that would be better than the Word of God?"

Proverbs 30:5-6 Every word of God is pure: He is a shield unto them that put their trust in Him. Add you not unto His words, lest He reprove you, and you be found a liar.

This is a warning not to delve into dangerous speculations, and then take the speculation one step further and add it to the Word of God. Or, give it an authority that is equivalent to the Word of God, as though the person who is telling you these things has been up to heaven and stepped back to earth; and he has added something, then, to the Word of God.

Now, this is a well-established principle that, as far as I know, first appears back in Deuteronomy 4. In the context here, "the word" means the commandments of God that appear in Deuteronomy 5.

Deuteronomy 4:2 You shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall you diminish aught from it, that you may keep the commandments [See the connection, right within the verse: word/commandments.] of the Lord your God which I command you.

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Deuteronomy 4:6 Keep therefore and do them: for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."

Now turn one more place, to Psalm 18. Here David writes:

Psalm 18:30-31 As for God, His way is perfect: the word of the Lord is tried: He is a buckler [a defender] to all those that trust Him. For who is God save the Lord? Or who is a rock save our God?

Who can be depended upon? Well, the Word of God can be depended upon—to deliver a person, to provide the right kind of guidance, to give us truth in regard to really everything that we might face in life.

When we connect these thoughts to Proverbs—and eventually we are going to begin to connect them to the book of Colossians—what they are saying is that the way of God is not improved by alloying it with human philosophy and speculations.

Blending God's way with these things has always been a major problem. It makes its first vivid appearance within the framework of a covenant all the way back in Exodus 32, and it continues right on through to the end of the Bible.

Philosophies are the conclusions of men garnered through human experience and logical reasoning. So far, so good—because God certainly does require that we use our reasoning powers in relation to His Word. So we gather evidence from His Word, use our reasoning powers, and then we apply it to our individual situations.

However, human philosophies very frequently begin with a faulty premise, or introduce evidence that does not agree with biblical truth. The conclusions are thus wrong, and sometimes downright evil, because the faulty evidence or the wrong premise skewed the conclusion.

That, in a nutshell, was precisely what Paul was dealing with in Colossae. It was an attempt by some to introduce a flawed pagan philosophy that, on the surface, sounded very attractive. And, apparently, a fairly large number of church members were taking it up. God thought that it was serious enough, and it was going to provide instruction for His people right on down to the end, that He recorded it in His Word.

Also back in the New Testament, and impacting on this same theme that I am beginning with, we find:

II Thessalonians 2:10 And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved.

Would you say that these people, who were trying to skew the Colossian Christians away from the way of God, had a love of the truth? Paul did not think so. He thought their philosophy was skewing people away from the Kingdom of God, not towards it.

II Thessalonians 2:11-13 And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believe not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God has from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.

If this philosophy that was impacting upon the Colossian church was really truth, do you think Paul would have written against it so strongly? Not on your life, because the Spirit of God in him would have led him to see that it indeed was truth. But as an apostle, it was his responsibility to teach these people that this was not true. As attractive as it might seem to them, it was wrong! It was evil, and it was something to turn away from.

II Thessalonians 2:15 Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions, which you have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.

How frequently the servants of God have had to do that! John uses almost the same words at the beginning of I John 1. He says, "Look, our hands have handled. We have looked at Him with our eyes." Who is the *we*? He is talking about the apostles. He is saying, "Get back to what **we** taught you." Jude says the same thing. Peter said the same thing. "Hey, they are making merchandise out of you."

These men were not confronting the same people, but they probably were confronting elements of the same philosophical system that was impacting so strongly on the church way back in the 50s and 60s A.D. There is always a strong drive in human nature to make the way of God more attractive to the senses by blending it with

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traditions that are not part of God's Word.

This is what you will find in Exodus 32, and I am sure that God included that in His Word so that we would see it etched vividly—where these people tried to introduce the religion they had just come out of, in Egypt, into the way of God. And they used the bull to determine the nature of God. No wonder God was so upset. They were trying to syncretize paganism with the truth of God, if we can put it this way, just 12 chapters after He began to give them the terms of the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant was signed, sealed, and delivered in Exodus 24, so 8 chapters later—which must have been a very short period of time chronologically—they were already trying to twist the nature of God into something different.

That is what we see elements of here in the book of Colossians. The theological term for what we are looking at here is **syncretism**. It means a joining, a meshing, or a blending together, an alloying. Think back to Proverbs 30. Is there anything better than the Word of God? How can we think to improve it by adding something?

The outstanding historical example of syncretism (at least in terms of what we will call "the Christian religion") is Catholicism. One reason that it is the universal religion is because it has absorbed traditions of worship from cultures all over the world. And its Protestant daughters, having come from the same system, have not rid themselves of the same plague. What they did rid themselves of was the governance of the Pope and several of the more blatant pagan practices.

What happened in Colossae was yet another attempt by Satan to blend his way with God's, and thus weaken and possibly destroy through producing people who would not be in God's image. It is an ancient version of "garbage in, garbage out."

Brethren, the command to keep the Sabbath and the holy days cannot be nullified by condemning an abuse of keeping them. In Colossae, was Paul condemning the keeping of the Sabbath and holy days? Or was he condemning the doctrines of men, who added ritualistic and ascetic restrictions to faith in Christ?

In order to clearly answer that, in your mind's eye I want you to step back and look at the broad picture presented in the whole New Testament. There is not a single verse that states that either Christ or Paul taught that the Fourth Commandment is nullified. On the other hand, there are numerous examples of Jesus and the apostles observing the days.

If Paul had kept the Sabbath himself (which the book of Acts clearly shows) and yet

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taught that it did not have to be kept, it would have been confusion. Is God the author of confusion? And, at the same time, it would have been a bald-faced hypocrisy, and therefore sin.

Please turn back to Exodus 12, because I want you to see this in print. God established a principle that we need to consider. Here we are in a section that deals directly with one of the festivals of God.

Exodus 12:48-49 And when a stranger [a Gentile] shall sojourn with you [That is, become part of your company], and will keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land: for no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof. One law shall be to him that is homeborn, and unto the stranger that sojourns among you.

Both Israelite and Gentile are to submit to exactly the same laws, to exactly the same customs, to exactly the same traditions that Paul was referring to there in II Thessalonians 2:15. That is, those things that had been taught to them by the apostles.

Paul kept the Sabbath. Jesus kept the Sabbath. There is not a single record of a controversy between Jew and Gentile over whether to keep the Sabbath. If Paul had taught the Fourth Commandment had been repealed, it would have split the church wide open; and he would have had to answer objections in his epistles.

Think about the controversy that arose over circumcision—a minor affair compared to the Sabbath, which is the Fourth Commandment—one of the Big Ten. Can you imagine the internal war that would have broken out in the church if Paul had taught that the Sabbath was done away—after the Jews had been keeping it for around 1500 years? They knew it was one of the Ten Commandments. They knew, according to Ezekiel 20, that they had gone into captivity for not keeping it. They had devised hundreds of regulations through the centuries, since Ezra, that were designed to ensure that people kept it—in order to protect them from going into captivity again.

It is mind boggling to think of the extent that these people will go to in order to say that the Sabbath is done away; and they do it without any proof. But what if Paul had said in Colossians 2:16-17, "Let no man judge you in murder or adultery." These are commandments of equal value, of equal weight, equal authority. I will tell you: Not many people would assume that God had changed His mind and that they were no longer sins without solid, clear, definite, unavoidable, inalienable, unquestionable scriptures right

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out of God's Word. They certainly would require more than one obscure verse out of the book of Colossians.

The Gnostics' self-denying way of life appeared righteous, but it was not of value in building **the righteousness of God**. Let us not get the wrong impression here. Asceticism and self-denial require discipline, but the use of discipline in Christian life is not in question in the book of Colossians.

It is very easy to read, "Why are you subject to ordinances—Touch not, taste not, handle not—which are to perish with the using?" and leap to the conclusion that Christianity is merely a mental operation and that disciplining oneself and following rules is of no consequence. This thought might be true if those verses are considered without understanding them in a much larger context. In fact, that is a major clue to properly understanding Colossians 2:16-17.

What is the major clue? Paul is not saying we do not have to discipline ourselves. I am going to prove that to you. You see, these verses here towards the end of Colossians 2—Touch not, taste not, handle not...and so forth—they do not stand alone either. When we read understanding what Paul wrote in chapters 1 and 3, Colossians 2:16-17 becomes a great deal clearer. In fact, Paul is **affirming** the keeping of the Sabbath and holy days. And that is the only conclusion that can be reached if Colossians 2:16-17 is going to remain consistent with the entire Bible!

Let us get back to this thing about *discipline* by turning to II Timothy 2.

II Timothy 2:1-5 You therefore my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that you have heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit you to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also. [Now here comes the encouragement to do something.] You therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that wars entangles himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who has chosen him to be a soldier. And if a man also strive [Pay attention to that word.] for masteries...

What does that picture to you? Does that not picture to you somebody who is striving to finish at the top, striving to win, striving to be the best that they possibly can? Not to just be an "also ran." Not to just be one of the pack. But to be somebody who is looked upon by God as someone who is worth watching—because we have to put this in context of what God wants us to be. Does He not want us to glorify Him by being as much like Him

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as possible, as much like Jesus Christ as possible? That is what **real mastery** is! Within the context here, it is **to be like Christ**.

II Timothy 2:5 If a man [If you and I, we] strive for masteries [to really be like Christ], yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully.

He takes this metaphor from athletics. So Paul advises Timothy that, if he is striving to win in his ministry, he will not be crowned unless he disciplines himself to follow the rules. Is that clear?

In games (whether it is a card game, whether you are playing croquet out in the backyard, whether it is basketball, or whatever) one is often confronted with the opportunity to bend, or to break, the rules. So the player must discipline himself, or face the penalties—or even find himself disqualified. Is that not right? If you break the rules in football, you get a 5-yard penalty or a 15-yard penalty. If you break the rules in some games, you just get thrown right out. The athlete, then, must discipline himself.

But Paul is using this in regard to you and me. If we are going to be crowned, we are going to have to strive within the rules. We are going to have to discipline ourselves. In Timothy's case, the rules are scattered throughout Paul's epistle to him. In the case of the Sabbath and the holy days, they are the only days in the entire Bible that God gives His approval to for use in worshipping Him. Think about that. That is part of "the rules."

God never gives His approval to Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday. It is only the Sabbath. He never gives His approval to Halloween, Christmas, Easter, and all of the other days. It is only the ones that He has pointed out to us in Leviticus 23. If we are going to strive for the mastery within the rules, those are the ones that we are going to have to live with, and use in the right way.

Let us continue this thought about disciplining oneself. In I Corinthians 9, there is a four-verse section that all of us are familiar with.

I Corinthians 9:24-27 Know you not that they which run in a race run all, but one receives the prize? So run, that you may obtain. And every man that strives for the mastery [There is that word again.] is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beats the air: but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.

Paul very clearly said that he beat his body. The immediate context—involving restraint, self-control, and discipline—begins back in verse 19. Simply stated, within its context, he is saying that Christian liberty should not be used to justify hedonism. Hedonism, roughly, is to live any old way.

Paul is saying, in this context, that in this case he disciplined himself to live within local requirements as long as that did not cause him to break God's laws. He disciplined himself in a way to avoid offense to local citizens, in order to present Christianity in the best possible light. Overall, beginning in verse 19 and carrying all the way through to verse 27, he is saying that nobody ever got anywhere without the sternest of discipline.

Please do not lose track of what we are connecting this to. We are connecting it to Colossians 2 and 3 most specifically, because many have jumped to the conclusion that "touch not, taste not, handle not" means that God is not concerned about rules. Unless you see that in a wider context, and then put that wider context back into Colossians 2, you may be misled too.

Paul says here, in an overall sense, that nobody ever got anywhere without the sternest of discipline. He is saying that life is a battle because of the way Satan has deceived this world. Paul is saying that, even as an undisciplined out-of-shape runner cannot win races, neither can we as a flabby Christian soldier win our spiritual and moral battles.

And so first, beginning in verse 24, Paul urges us to **run** so that we may win. What kind of a picture does that give you? He does not say, "Run, so that you finish in the pack." He does not say, "Run, just merely that you might finish." He exhorts us to run that we might win!

Obviously, everybody is not going to be able to run at the same speed. Everybody is equipped differently in what we are involved in here. But each one of us is capable of running within our own capabilities. Each person is going to be judged on his own merits, not against anybody else. "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might." That is what underlies what Paul is saying here.

So we do not compare ourselves with other people. But we are to go all-out within the framework of what we have been given, and everybody is capable of going "all-out." God's exhortation through Paul is to run so that you may win. He is saying: **Take your spiritual life seriously.** Like a runner in a race, we must exert ourselves to the limit. And that takes *discipline*.

The Covenants, Grace, and Law (Part 22) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

When you are in a race (especially a long race like we are in), the desire to quit or the desire to relax comes very, very often. You might have heard the term that runners—especially long distance runners, marathoners—use. They talk about "hitting the wall." Do you know what that means? It means the runner has reached the place where they just cannot go any further. And so they stop. They "hit the wall." The wall stops them. And usually it has something to do with getting cramps in their legs, or they just lose their breath, or they lose their will to go on. They "hit the wall."

We are tempted to "hit the wall" very frequently because we think we cannot go on any further. Discipline has to be a part of a Christian's life.

I Corinthians 9:25 And every man that strives for the mastery is temperate [self-controlled] in all things.

Do you understand that? It is not just the race itself. That is the point here. The athlete must endure a severe struggle of both body and mind in lengthy training, arduous drills, diet, and rest. The discipline is not only necessary for the actual race, then, but every aspect of the runner's life. What he does in other areas of his life impacts on whether he will be able to compete and be victorious.

I Corinthians 9:26 I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beats the air.

Paul ran in such a way, so that he did not lose his aim. He disciplined himself so that he did not lose sight of the finish line. He says that he did not shadow box. That is what that means. "So fight I, not as one that beats the air." He did not shadow box. He did not simply flail away at life. He did not let his mind wander. Throughout his life, the goal was always before him. He was not wasting his time and energy on useless stabs into sheer vanity.

I Corinthians 9:27 But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection.

Do you know what that literally says in the Greek? It is kind of funny. It says, "I give my body a black eye." He bruised it. He was not easy on himself. It is just another way of saying that he severely disciplined himself. He was hard on himself. And then he tells why. So that he did not find himself **disqualified**.

The Covenants, Grace, and Law (Part 22) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

It sounds to me like maybe, perhaps, compared to Paul we might be just like so many Shannon Faulkners [the first woman admitted into The Citadel]—flabby and out of shape. And look at the spectacle and uproar that she caused. We do not want to be disqualified. Paul did not. And so he went all out.

Romans 8:13 For if you live after the flesh [pandering it], you shall die [Pretty blunt, is it not?]: but if you through the Spirit do mortify [kill, put to death] the deeds of the body, you shall live.

For one more [scripture] in regards to this, we will go right to the top and see what Jesus had to say about this.

Matthew 16:24 Then said Jesus unto His disciples, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

That is pretty blunt. That is orders from The Boss. A Christian must discipline himself. Even the term "disciple" has its roots in the same verb as "discipline." Disciple can be translated **disciplined one**. Now, get this. The issue in Colossians was that the Colossian Gnostics were urging their ritualistic ascetic discipline—there is nothing wrong with discipline—in the propitiation of demons without regard to faith in Christ, and therein lies a major false premise of that philosophy.

I am sure that it was the discipline that attracted the attention of those unsuspecting Christians there. They thought, "Wow, this is great!" But they were not spiritually minded enough to catch the bad foundation.

If these Gnostics had really had faith in Christ, then they would have shown it by believing what God said in the Old Testament regarding keeping the feasts, and they would not have even thought about using ascetic practices in relation to the holy days. Notice the multitude of clues, in Colossians 2, that Paul gives so that we can understand what the problem was.

Colossians 2:8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the traditions of men, after the rudiments [or, elements] of the world, and not after Christ.

I want you to pay particular attention to "elements of the world." Remember what I

The Covenants, Grace, and Law (Part 22) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>) mentioned to you the last time that I spoke, about what they were.

Colossians 2:15 And having spoiled principalities and powers...

What are principalities and powers? The demon spirits who rule over this earth, who have not yet been removed. Connect that with Ephesians 6. We are going to connect it to Galatians 4. Is it beginning to become clear?

Colossians 2:18 Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels...

Now, here comes a real clue. This ought to hit you right between the eyes.

Colossians 2:19 And not holding the Head [capitalized].

That is, not holding Christ! What did I tell you the major problem was here? The issue in Colossians was that the Colossian Gnostics were urging their ritualistic ascetic discipline in the propitiation of demons **without regard to faith in Christ**. "Not holding the Head."

If they had really had faith in Christ, they would have never urged that asceticism on those people because the Old Testament does not say a word about asceticism. God's feasts and God's Sabbath are times to rejoice! It may have looked good to the weak Colossian Christians, but Paul saw right through it. It did not fool him one bit!

I have said to you quite a number of times that God is not merely interested in *what* we do but *why* we do what we do. Do we do what we do because we have faith in God? Do we do what we do because we love God? Or because we have merely judged that it is good for us, without regard to Christ?

People can quit smoking without any thought of doing it because they love God, or because they have faith in Him. The same is true of the Sabbath. A person can be intellectually convinced by an argument that the Sabbath keeping is right, and not do it because they have any real love for God (or faith in God).

I have heard of businessmen who keep a book of Proverbs handy for advice on business and dealing with people. They did not take Proverbs' advice because they love

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God and have faith in Him, but because it is good for business. That is shown because they did not give God much concern in other areas of their life at all.

Romans 2:14-15 For when the Gentiles, which have not the law...

This is the key phrase here. "Which have not the law." They cannot do things in relation to God. They do not look upon certain things in relation to God at all.

Romans 2:14-15 For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature [not because of God] the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another.

Every society on earth supports the keeping of certain laws of God because they know by experience, by history, that it is good for their society. No government on earth openly supports the murder of their own because they know from history that, if they did, the whole society would be torn apart. And so they do not want people to murder because it is not good for their society.

Have you ever had anybody say to you (or have you ever heard anybody say), "Well, you will do it for them; but you will not do it for me"? It is a measure of that sort of thing that is involved here in the book of Colossians.

Colossians 3:1-5 If you then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God. Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth. [Now, here is the reason.] For you are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. [There is an obligation there.] When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with Him in glory. Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Is it possible, brethren, that we fail to understand how seriously God takes our relationship with Him? Did you notice how this chapter begins? *If you were raised with Christ, then (he says) live your life in conformity with Christ.* Were the Colossian Gnostics urging these people to live their lives in conformity to Christ? No, they were not. It

The Covenants, Grace, and Law (Part 22) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

looked attractive, but it was not in conformity with the Old Testament and the laws respecting the Sabbath and the holy days.

Paul is saying, "Why should you be satisfied with a broken cistern (demonism) when the fountain (Christ) is at hand? The solution to having the power to please God and overcome sin lies in this, not demons."

We are getting now to the solution. As we begin chapter 3, let us understand that Paul's major purpose in chapters 1-2 was to remind them that the object of their faith is Christ. In chapters 3-4 it is to remind them that the source of their life is Christ.

Did you get that? Chapters 1 and 2 are a very powerful and beautiful reminder that the object of our faith is **Christ**—not demons. And in chapters 3 and 4, the solution to overcoming is to go to the source of the power for our life; and that is **Jesus Christ**—not demons. Not traditions of men either.

Do you think that mortifying your members does not take strict discipline? Brethren, Paul is not talking about mental meditation here. He is talking about a voluntary, strenuous effort, and exertion. That is what that word—mortify—implies. Jesus put it another way: "If your eye offends you, pluck it out. If your hand offends you, cut it off." He did not mean to literally do it; but He said, "You have to go to an extreme of discipline here."

We are connecting the thought from Colossians to this here. It is important that we do these things for the right reason, and the right reason is because we are risen in Christ. It is our relationship with God that is important—not merely that we exercise discipline. It has to be done for the right reason. This is why I asked if we are aware of how seriously God takes our **relationship**.

The Gnostics were not 'doing their thing' and urging it upon the Colossian brethren because they loved God. They loved demons! To them, the true God was no different than all of the other gods of all the other nations. Paul's advice to the brethren was to "seek those things which are above"—not earthbound demons. You understand, do you not, that the demons are imprisoned on the earth. "Seek those things which are above" and not earthbound demons who are deceiving people into beating their bodies to find favor with them.

The word *seek* implies persevering effort, just like you seek gold. It would not be wrong to translate it "be constantly seeking." But even though it means to seek to obtain, the emphasis is on **what** is being sought. The Greek was written in an emphatic style. It is a

The Covenants, Grace, and Law (Part 22) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>)

style that Mr. Armstrong kind of used—where he capitalized words, and put all kinds of exclamation points, and underlined things, and wrote in different fonts here and there. Mr. Armstrong practiced an emphatic type of writing like that.

That is the way Greek was normally written. It was written in such a way to draw attention to certain words so that the person reading would understand what the writer wanted to be focused on. So, as we read here through the first part of Colossians 3, the emphasis is not on the seeking. The emphasis is on what is being sought.

However, the emphasis back in chapters 1 and 2 was on the object of our faith—Christ. Why are we doing this? Christ did what He did, and He is now our Boss. He is our Savior. He is our Lord and Master. He is our Elder Brother. He is God the Creator. He is our High Priest.

So the emphasis here [in Colossians 3] is on what is being sought. "Seeking to obtain" is one of the most common activities of everybody on earth. Everybody seeks to obtain—money, status, power, favor, or whatever. But (and this is a big "but") **seeking to obtain the right treasure** is very, very rare. Jesus made it so easy for us.

Matthew 6:33 "Seek you first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

That part is solved. That is what Paul is saying here. "Seek those things which are above."

Now, our life revolves around *a relationship*, and it is a very real relationship with the Creator and Ruler of all things. He was the One who initiated this relationship, by His calling. He continues it, by drawing us by His Spirit. He grants us repentance and forgiveness, so that we might have direct access to Him through prayer.

How do we respond? Do we continue to **seek Him**? The emphasis is on what is being sought. Do we continue to seek Him through daily, consistent and persistent, prayer? Do we give much of our time in studying His Word, so that we will know all about this One that we are going to marry? Do we honestly strive to conform our lives to what He says, in revealing Himself to us?

Or do we only do the things that please us? It is easy to say, "Hey, life is easier that way." Should we discipline ourselves? Paul resoundingly says, "Yes!" And he instructs Timothy (and you and me) that one had better play the game according to the rules.

Why does Paul go into this? The source of our power to discipline ourselves is in seeking those things that are above. Was that not the issue in Colossians? How can a person overcome? Well, do you do it by propitiating demons and disciplining yourself through these rituals and asceticism—touch not, taste not, handle not? What Paul is saying is, if we seek those things that are above, that Being with whom we have a relationship responds to those who are really seeking to be like Him. That is, those who do all they can—because of Him.

Brethren, this is the precursor to a good marriage. Think about that, in relation to Revelation 19 and the marriage that is coming. I said in my last sermon that character results from natural ability plus education, training, and discipline. Well, brethren, it is through **access to Him** that God, by His Spirit, greatly enhances our natural ability to do the things of God—by giving us the love of God. The love of God is shed abroad by His Spirit.

I would put "natural" in quotation marks, because it is not really natural. It is an aspect of His grace. That is, His gifts to us—that we might succeed in His plan. It is by this means that He participates actively in our education, our training, and discipline; but we must **choose** to yield to them, or it will never happen.

"Set your affections on things above" is just another way of saying seek God, or seek God's way. Love God, because that is where real life is. It means to ponder and yearn for. And He says this because of a very simple principle: **What we greatly desire to have, we will take action to obtain.** Think about it. It is so simple.

Do you really desire your relationship with God to continue and to get better? If you do, you are going to strive to obtain it. That takes work, and work requires discipline. This is one of the major differences between work and play. Play is usually defined as generally aimless amusement. Paul did not shadow box. His approach to life was not aimless. He did what he did with Christ as the object of his devotion and the source of his strength to be in the Kingdom of God.

Just recently, I read that professional athletic coaches scrutinize an athlete's work ethic just as thoroughly, or perhaps even more thoroughly, than his natural ability because they have learned from experience that is what separates the "great" from the "not so great." The really great ones, they practice just as enthusiastically and with as great determination as they play the actual game. They are consumed by it. They do not play aimlessly. It is not "play" to them because they are seeking to do their best at all times.

So if someone ever tells you that you cannot overcome the spiritual by the physical, you

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had better understand that person is not giving you the whole story. The spiritual and the physical are not mutually exclusive. They go together, like bread and butter. The spiritual source will always manifest itself through the physical acts of life.

Ephesians 2:2-3 Wherein in time past you walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience: among whom also we all had our conversation [conduct] in time past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

The spiritual source will always manifest itself through the physical acts of life—our conduct. Paul's advice, his exhortation, his admonishment was to **seek God!** Seek those things that are above, because the spiritual source is going to determine the physical acts that we do. It is going to determine *how* they are done and *why* they are done.

In the past, without realizing it, we sought—or, were sought out by—demons. But now God has rescued us from that, and it becomes our responsibility to seek Him. If we are seeking Him, it will begin to show in our lives. Faith in God works through love. We are going to see that in the book of Galatians. ***Faith works through love.*** Think about that.

It will still be a struggle to overcome the pull of the former spiritual domination. But unless our contact with Christ manifests itself in obedience to Him, we are either only part way there or perhaps, even, our faith is a dead one. Brethren, it is grace *and* law—not grace *or* law. It is faith *and* works. If we do not discipline ourselves to use our faith in and love for God to seek Him, there is no witness. There will be no fruit. There will be no image of God in us.

We show what we love and have faith in by what we do with our time. Life is time used. It is so easy to be distracted from the things of God, as Paul wrote there at the beginning of Hebrews 12, because it is not natural. That sin that so easily besets us [is what he was talking about]. My greatest concern, as the pastor of this group, is that we will be distracted by such things as the cares of this life. Or even such things as the New World Order, because it burns up so much of our time.

Is the New World Order coming to pass? Most certainly it is. Satan is getting his forces aligned for the grand-smash finale of this age. But our responsibility to God does not begin and end with the New World Order. I fear that people will allow themselves to get distracted by biblical technicalities, spending oodles of time researching some

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interesting but minor point, and virtually make a religion of it—because it is easier and it is more interesting to do than overcoming, and truly loving God and fellow man.

Like the calendar. Brethren, God is faithful. If the calendar were such an essential issue with God, He would not wait 1500 or 2000 years to set His church right. But history clearly shows that the true church kept the same calendar as the Jews all through the centuries. So I can only conclude that will have to do, until He returns and aligns even the heavens the way they should be.

Brethren, read I Corinthians 13 with Revelation 2 and 3, and get the sense of what Paul and John were inspired to write. Those chapters set for us major priorities in our life in terms of every day practical application. It is **overcoming** that counts, in order that we might love as God loves and thus be bearing His image.

Let us conclude with three scriptures very quickly. Turn back to the book of Micah. Here is a priority. Here is God's purpose, God's way, described in giant principles.

Micah 6:6-8 Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

Is that not simple? **Seek God** is what he says. Now let us look at that scripture in Matthew 23. This is another one of those scriptures that gathers giant principles together, and there are all kinds of sermons within them. Nonetheless, it is a comprehensive stating of what God wants us to do.

Matthew 23:23 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law [Here it comes—the weightier matters of the law.]: judgment, mercy, and faith.

Judgment is justice. This is very similar to Micah. It is being fair, being equitable, doing unto others as you would have others do unto you.

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I Corinthians 13:13 And now abides faith, hope, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

God's way revolves around these things. When Mr. Armstrong said to us, "You people are not getting it," this is generally what he meant. We were allowing ourselves to become distracted, and less important activities were dominating our lives. And look, brethren, at what happened since his death. His concerns were proven true. When the test came, most of us were blown right out of the water! Only now are some of us beginning to catch our balance.

We were not getting it, because we were not prioritizing properly. We were not really seeking God. We let Mr. Armstrong do the work, while we frittered away our time. Yes, we supported him with our tithes, but it was not enough. We have to get back to really and truly seeking God if we are going to live His way, and overcome, and be prepared for His Kingdom.

Next time, we will pick up right here and then go on into the book of Galatians.